

COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

May 17, 2022

The Honorable Joseph Biden
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington DC

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing to join Senators Brown, Wyden, and Casey to request that you establish a “Beneficiary Advocate” position within the Social Security Administration (SSA).

You have rightly called Social Security a “sacred trust” between the federal government and the people, promising financial security in return for their contributions to the program in each and every paycheck. A critical component of that promise is to ensure that retirees, people with severe disabilities, and survivors of deceased workers receive the benefits they have earned. However, when individuals cannot access SSA to obtain those benefits, the government has failed to keep its promise.

The Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security is holding a hearing today on “Strengthening Social Security’s Customer Service.” This hearing will shine a light on the challenges to SSA’s customer service both during the pandemic and over the last 10 years, as well as identify solutions.

During the pandemic, SSA field offices were rightly closed to protect the health and safety of customers and employees – but unfortunately for many Americans, this posed a barrier to accessing much-needed benefits and services. Many seniors, low-income individuals, people of color, and people with disabilities lack access to a computer or have difficulty navigating the phone system. In-person walk-up services at local SSA field offices are essential to removing barriers and ensuring access.

SSA has struggled to provide adequate customer service even before the pandemic because funding for the agency’s general operating budget has not kept up with the number of beneficiaries served, and in fact has been reduced after accounting for inflation. Chair Rosa DeLauro has fought for sufficient increases and included a substantial increase for SSA’s operating budget in the House-passed Appropriations bill for 2022.

The number of beneficiaries since 2010 has grown by 21 percent from 54 million to 65 million as of March 2022, yet SSA's budget has fallen by 14 percent during that same time, after accounting for inflation. SSA now has fewer than 60,000 workers despite the increase in beneficiaries – the lowest staffing levels in 25 years.

As a result of inadequate funding and a shrinking workforce, in recent years the agency was forced to shut 67 field offices, shorten hours at field offices, and put off critical updates to its information technology and telephone systems. In addition, individuals appealing a denial of their application for disability benefits experienced growing waits for a hearing before an Administrative Law Judge. More than 100,000 Americans have died awaiting a final decision on their appeal of a denial of SSA disability benefits.

We commend your Administration and the agency on its re-opening April 7 with 98% of its 1,200 field offices open to walk-in visitors and with its increased use of telework for employees. But more must be done.

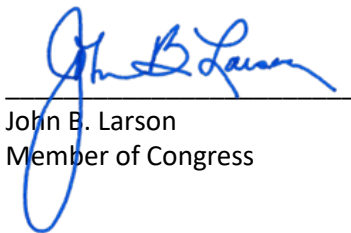
We recognize that every SSA employee is inherently an advocate for beneficiaries, but we believe that an office of "Beneficiary Advocate" would greatly assist beneficiaries by providing a voice within the agency representing beneficiaries, elevating and highlighting systemic problems interfering with access to benefits and services, similar to the Internal Revenue Service Taxpayer Advocate.

This position would help ensure that the "sacred trust" between the federal government and its people is upheld.

Sincerely,



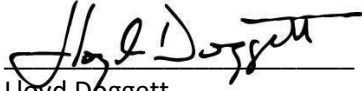
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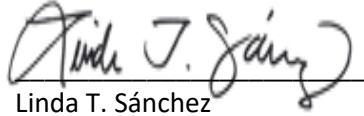
Earl Blumenauer
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Ron Kind
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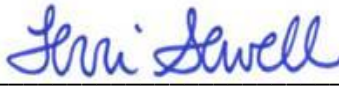
Bill Pascrell, Jr.
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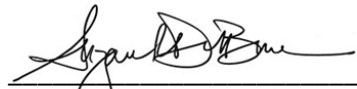
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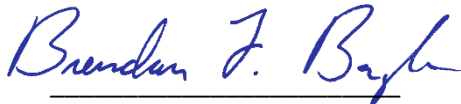
Judy Chu
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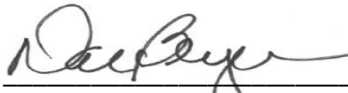
Gwen Moore
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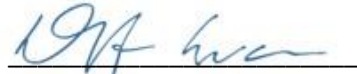
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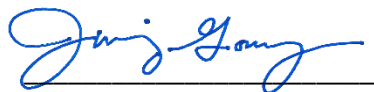
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